Pain with swallowing

Oncology treatments, such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy, may cause pain with swallowing in or around the food pipe (oesophagitis).

What is oesophagitis?
Oesophagitis is the inflammation of the oesophagus. This is the food pipe that connects the throat to the stomach.

Symptoms of oesophagitis include:
- Pain and burning after swallowing
- Reflux or indigestion
- Feeling of food being stuck

Symptoms usually occur:
- 3 – 4 days after chemotherapy
- 2 – 4 weeks after the start of radiotherapy treatment.

Symptoms will usually increase during treatment. Symptoms may persist for a few weeks after treatment has finished and then start to improve.

Please note, if you:
- have difficulty swallowing (rather than pain)
- are coughing or choking when eating or drinking

Tell your Dietitian, Nurse or Doctor so that you are referred to a Speech Pathologist.

Nutrition goal
Pain and difficulty with swallowing may lead to a reduced fluid or food intake and weight loss. The goal is to obtain enough nutrition to meet your needs and maintain your weight. Adequate nutrition will also help with healing and recovery from treatment.

Dietary modification and pain medications can help prevent and relieve pain so that you are able to eat enough.

Pain relief
If you have pain with swallowing, it is important to tell your Doctor as they can prescribe pain medication or adjust your current medication. Take medications as advised by the medical team. Pay particular attention to the timing of your medications. It may be useful to take your medications before a meal.
Diet changes to make eating easier when you have pain with swallowing:

- Soften foods by chopping, mincing, blending or dipping them into milk, soups, tea and coffee.
- Sip fluids with your meals.
- Choose moist foods or add sauces, gravies, margarine, cream, custard.
- Avoid foods if they sting or burn after swallowing. These may include salty foods, spices, fruit juice, vinegar and alcohol.
- Avoid drinks or foods that are very hot or very cold if they cause you pain. Warm or cool food and drink may be better tolerated.
- Avoid (or soften) rough, crunchy or dry foods such as crisps, nuts, dry biscuits, toast etc.

If you are eating less:

- Try smaller, more frequent meals. Aim for 6 small meals per day.
- Try nourishing drinks such as milkshakes, smoothies, or products such as Sustagen or Ensure.

These changes may only be temporary. If you are concerned about any long term health effects, please discuss with your dietitian.

For more information

- Speak to your Doctor or Dietitian
- Call the Cancer Council helpline: 13 11 20 (toll free)
  Mon to Fri 8am to 8pm

Dietitian: __________________________
Contact: __________________________